

A Portrait of Arbois's 1993 Fete de Vin
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Author's note: This text was written when I was working as artist in-resident at Arbois's Louis Pasteur studio on 'The Computer Virus Project': an experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. While there I studied wine-tasting at the Ecole du vin (wine school) and under an array of local wine makers, most notably Frederic Lornet for whom I designed two wine labels. Arbois, childhood home to Louis Pasteur, is the wine capital of the Jura.



Self-differentiation is the movement of a virtuality which actualizes itself.

- Gilles Deleuze, *Bergson's Conception of Difference*

I

From the outset I must examine the impertinence of writing an introduction to a wine festival so small and so beautiful that the question of my ultimate effect on it (however minor) cannot be avoided. It seems that the few occasions and places really worth introducing to strangers through the media are exactly those which it is a tragic mistake to do so. Regardless, I cannot but help to commit such an impertinence as it pertains to the little known Fete de Vin which is held every summer in Arbois, the wine capital of the central-eastern region of France called the Jura.

Lying just east of the famous Burgundy wine region, Jura wines are considered to be some of the most unique and interesting in France. Indeed the wines of the Jura are considered by connoisseurs to be some of the most 'particular' in France since they are made from extremely rare types of grapes (the wine's cepage) which hail

back to gallo-roman times. The fact that they are little known is due to their quantitative rarity, as the Jura produces only one percent of all French wine. This rarity, this scarcity, and this invisibility however also explains the Fete de Vin's authenticity, charm, and pluck.

I can only justify this introduction to Arbois's Fete de Vin to myself this way - in the hope that other people will see and feel the meaningful essence of what I came to perceive in the course of developing intimacy with this unique occurrence and people. What I hope to do for the readers of this introduction to Arbois's Fete de Vin who are not familiar with it is to trace the more significant phases of my own appreciation of it - for it took me some time to come to a full, reflective appreciation of its significance in its entirety.

To exhaustively describe Arbois's Fete de Vin for the purpose of attracting visitors to it, I shall not do, other than to say it would primarily appeal to those lovers of charming architecture, nature, art, music, dance, and, of course, great food and wine. This should suffice for the brevity of promotion. But by this statement I do not want to suggest that the distinction of the event is primarily sensual, or that its astonishing simple yet dignified emotional tone covers a vacuity of deep communal, historical and religious content. Indeed it obtains just such an emotional content largely from an accurate rendering of the daily, simple needs of commerce, pleasure and exchange of the village. But a representational action that is more fully alive than ordinary daily life demands something of the conventional consumer which the consumer is not frequently prepared to give - and that is intimacy.

To suggest that the Fete de Vin does not appeal primarily to the consumer is not to say that it is not a commercial enterprise, but that it is in fact so good of one that one doesn't realize it is commercial. That is what makes its commerce so alluring.

II

When I first entered the Fete at around 11 a.m. I found the opening rather slow and dragging, until the appearance of the local wine makers/merchants along the Grand Rue. From rows of linen tables lining the street, various wine producers dispersed freely their wines to the public. The wine flowed most freely. And from

this rhythm, this music of flowing wine, more or less complex and elaborate, the Fete de Vin rose to its first level of intensity.

At first I was under the impression that it was the wine merchant's product alone which gave the festival its vitality, and I believed the costumed rituals and parading to be superfluous. But I soon became convinced that the unity of both aspects was essential, both dramatically and financially, to the event. It was notable, however, that as the other people visiting the Fete became alive for me, and while the focus shifted, the figure of the merchant was by no means diminished. We were in his gratitude, and thus he came to take on a different and more profound importance when seen as a catalyst for the whole pattern of pleasure. He ceased to be like a brilliant actor in an otherwise unpersuasively performed play.

In normal, actual, consumer life, such a wine salesman might tend to dominate social interactions with the intensity of his frenzied sales pitch; squelching reciprocity, and intimidation. But in the Fete his role became nothing of the kind. Indeed, gradually I came to see that together with his egotism and swagger he also had to show for himself a heroically deep humility.

This humility did not often appear so centrally, so clearly, as in the prodigious scene of the emptying of one of his bottles and the immediate presentation of the replacement bottle. At that point, his consumer-oriented monologues, brilliant and witty in themselves, became undictated by any cynical indifference to other people's sensibilities, and, on the contrary, he seemed to swell into a hypersensitive awareness of them. This distentious feeling was displayed most clearly in his overcoming his understandable revulsion against the strain of freely pouring himself dry.

Indeed, at the Fete, this continual pouring dry took on a heightened symbolic nuance for me. The wine itself became, seemingly, freely poured dry so as to drown the continual whining of humanity - poured dry too to make people more supportable of their own desire for pleasure, and thus less intolerant of other people's ignobility.

III

I cannot think of one of these sacrificial merchants who has not gone on living in my mind - but their meaning for me is not simply a collection of individual portraits. Indeed they are all knotted up together for me by what I guess I think of as destiny (I came to know and understand them through the effect that they had on each other, as well as on me and my family and my fellow guests), rather than by the deliberate choice of their occupation and company. It is this whole pattern which they formed in my head, rather than any individual identity, that became the focus of interest and realization for me.

In the American version of Puritanical morality that I remember, it is tacitly assumed that if one was thrifty, practical, shrewd, and prudent one ought to have a "successful" life. Viewed from this light, Arbois's Fete de Vin appeared to take on even a more profound significance. To regard this group of maker-merchants as only commodifiers was to miss the point of this event's significance at large and to only confirm our baser values - values implicitly found in American-like commodified mentalities. Instead, the sacrificial pouring action which took place at the Fete appeared to me unquestionably to be those values typical of the creative imagination in service to real human needs - and clearly not the actions/values motivated by the free sample ploy of a cynical promotional campaign.

As I said at the start, I am conscious of the danger of impertinence in discussing the Fete's existence and meaning at all, but given the enormous emphasis on consumerist economic values which by contrast permeates the American mentality, Arbois's Fete de Vin left me prepared to find again a genuine achievement in value and style - along with the gracefulness and grandeur of forfeiture.